

Helms Proposes to Build Road in Great Smokies County wants Interior to fulfill its promise of economic aid

BRYSON CITY, N.C.—The proposal for a road through a remote area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park has surfaced again after Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) included \$16 million for the project as a last-minute provision in this year's transportation appropriation bill.

If the project, known as the North Shore Road, goes forward, it would create about 21 miles of new road through what the National Park Service says is "the largest roadless area in the Eastern United States." It would likely also open up some of the surrounding communities to commercial development, similar to that of the park's other gateway cities—Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and Cherokee, North Carolina. The money is available for one year to begin planning the road.

Backers of the road say it will renew economic opportunities for rural Swain County, North Carolina, which lost "half of its jobs and half its population" when the park expanded in 1944, said David Monteith, a member of the Swain County Board of Commissioners. The road will also provide public access to 19th and 20th century family cemeteries now located inside the park. The Park Service now transports family members to the cemeteries on a scheduled basis.

The battle over the road began in 1943 when the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) impounded Fontana Lake, south of the park, for producing power during World War II. The dam flooded North Carolina Highway 288 and left 44,000 acres of private land inaccessible. TVA agreed to purchase the 44,000 acres, give it to the Interior Department for inclusion in Great Smoky Mountains, and pay the state \$400,000.

To compensate local residents for the loss of the road, the state and the Interior Department agreed to build a new road along the north shore of the lake. They expected the road would increase recreational opportunities inside the park and improve the local economy.

In the mid 1960s the state completed its section of the road from Bryson City to the park, and the Park Service began construction of its share of the road into the park. Early in the project, the agency hit anakeesta rock, which produces acids and heavy metals that are leached by rainwater and kill aquatic life when they enter streams. Because of the environmental hazards, Congress pulled funding for the project, and construction stopped. Meanwhile, a new state highway was completed along the southern shore of the lake.

Since then, the county and some members of Congress have been fighting to resume construction. "We feel that Interior made a legitimate contract with Swain County, and it should be fulfilled," Monteith said. He doesn't believe that the Park Service's environmental concerns are still valid because the state highway department has since built highways through anakeesta rock.

Shirley Crisp, former owner of Crisp and Crisp Construction Co., which has built roads for the state and encountered anakeesta during construction, said that spraying the rock with a limestone and water solution stops the rocks from leaching.

NPCA Southeast Regional Director Don Barger disagrees. "History of mining in the

area suggests that the acid drainage is not so easily prevented," he said. Limestone is water soluble, and the Smokies are a temperate rainforest. "The scale of this road and the steep, isolated terrain create unacceptable risks for a national park," he added.

Smokies Assistant Superintendent Phil Francis said that the \$16 million allocation is a fraction of the estimated \$150 million the Park Service estimates is needed for the project. "The costs are constantly rising," Francis added. The Park Service has offered the county monetary compensation for the road several times but has been rejected.